DEMOCRACY vs FASCISM

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THE SUBJECT on which I have been asked to speak today is Democracy versus Fascism, and it is about as big a subject as could have been suggested. It would make a fine topic for a good old-fashioned Fourth of July oration, and I can just see the politicians steaming and beating their breasts about it on the platforms draped with flags next summer. You could just make the sky shake with the roar of your voice when you praised democracy and damned fascism to the lowest pits of hell. But I can't make you a Fourth of July oration here today for two reasons. First, this is not the Fourth of July, and second, I am obviously not an orator.

I am not even going to try to make your hearts leap and your hair bristle by saying how fine democracy is and how horrible it would be to have to live under a Fascist government. I only want to make it perfectly clear before I go any further that I am just as devoted to the cause of democracy as any person in this room, and I would be just as ready to fight against the establishment of a Fascist government in this country, or a Communist government either, for that matter. I was fortunate enough to be born in a democracy, and I want to live in a democracy all my life.

But let's not make the fatal mistake of taking this democracy of ours for granted. It is an

axiom that once you take a very vital thing for granted, you are in danger of losing that thing. What is this great possession of ours that we call democracy? Is it something that God gave to every American just as he gave us blue eyes or brown eyes? Is it a part of us like our names or our voices or the color of our hair? In other words, when you and I were born in the United States, did Fate pronounce the words, "here is a person who has a right to live in a democracy all his life"?

I don't believe any of that is true. Furthermore, I think it is dangerous for us to think that we have any inalienable claim on democracy. We were all taught in school to think about this country as a democratic nation, just as we were taught to think of it as a country with an ocean on each side of it and a vast expanse of land in between. Those last are geographical facts that were produced by the laws of nature, but there is no law of nature that makes this country a democracy. That condition depends entirely on the people who live in this country. And what's more, it depends on each new generation of Americans. Just because a group of men, the most brilliant who ever foregathered in any nation in history, got together in the late Eighteenth Century and decided that they would set up a democratic form of government in this country is no reason why we, a century and a half later, should feel that we have any God-given right to live in a democracy if we do nothing to help preserve and strengthen that democracy. The best thing we have is a democratic tradition that has lasted for over a

hundred and fifty years, and we need to guard that tradition as our most treasured possession.

Of course there were factors of geography and economics that made this a good country in which to make a test of democracy. When the founding fathers sat down in a convention hall in Philadelphia to talk over the future of the new country that had only recently broken away from England, they gave full consideration to the fact that here was a great new part of the world that was so little developed that its destiny could be shaped in almost any direction. In those days, the United States was the most isolated country in the civilized world, and that again was an advantage for our democratic experiment. The Atlantic Ocean rolled away from our shores for 3,000 miles, cutting us off from the political turmoils and constant wars of Europe. On the other side of this long, lean country that lay along the seacoast, there stretched a vast wilderness that had never been developed at all, most of it loosely controlled by the European powers, but essentially a part of the New World that could be shaped and built for the future.

Most important of all, the great first generation of American statesmen saw another condition that made it look possible for a real democracy to flourish in this part of the world. That condition was the comparatively even distribution of wealth, such wealth as then existed in America, and the ample opportunity for every man to acquire some part of the land. Thomas Jefferson, who captured and put into words the dream of a democracy in America, never con-

ceived of a democracy on any other principle than the ownership of private property by a great mass of people. He thought of each American as a man who would own some land or some of the tools of production. He envisioned such a man as a free man who could call his soul his own, a man fit to share in the responsibilities of a democracy. His ideal of a democracy was a country where all men were born equal and where all men would be given at least a reasonably equal opportunity. We have tried ever since to think that that was what our democracy was. It never has been really that since Jefferson lived and it is far from that today, but the ideal is so beautiful that we still want to try to make it true.

The other founders of our country shared in Jefferson's ideal and wanted to see it work, with the notable exception of Alexander Hamilton. He believed quite frankly in a form of government which would be ruled by one single class of people, the people he was fond of calling "the rich and well-born". The others really wanted to try a democracy on our shores. They never imagined that after a century and a half of democracy, there would be 42 per cent of the farmers of this country who would be tenants or share-croppers, owning not one inch of the land they worked. Those are not the free men Jefferson thought could be trusted to take their part in a people's government. Jefferson and his associates could never have imagined that when the greatest year of our material prosperity came in 1929, there would be 41 per cent of all American families with an income of less

than $1,500 a year for the whole family. Taking the cost of living in 1929, the Brookings Institute calculated that $2,500 a year was the minimum amount that was necessary to buy the basic necessities for a family's health and welfare, and here were four out of every ten families whose income ranged from $1,500 a year down to nothing at all. And that was 1929. Jefferson would not have thought it was a democracy where 5 per cent of the people had more money than the other 95 per cent put together, but that is his America as it has developed in the Twentieth Century.

Yet despite the failures we Americans have made in putting the democratic ideal into practice, we are still convinced that it offers more than any other form of government. But how much longer are we going to be able to keep this democracy of ours if we don't make it work better than it has been working in the last couple of generations? If we let more and more of our people sink below the level of freedom and self-respect, are they going to want to go on trying this experiment in democracy, that has brought so few advantages to them? If you were a share-cropper like millions of others in America, trying to bring up a family on somebody else's land, living in somebody else's rickety house, and working like a slave all year to make less than two hundred dollars for your labor, if you were one of those people, would you want to go on half starving and seeing your children half starve in a democracy, or would you feel like letting somebody persuade you to try a Fascist government or a Communist government

or some other form that made you think you might have a little more food for your children and a little more money to buy them clothes and medicine when they got sick? How would you feel about that if you were in the position of those millions of Americans scattered all over our country?

Don't misunderstand me. I don't think that Fascism or Communism offers a good exchange to those people, but what have they got to lose? Suppose they try Fascism and it doesn't work, would they be much worse off than they are now? And there is nothing in this world to prevent the American people from trying a Fascist form of government if a majority of them ever get discouraged with the life they are leading under a democracy. Democracy offers you and me a lot of things we would not give up for anything in the world. But are we who are the beneficiaries of democracy making it work well enough to offer any special inducements to the great, great army of underprivileged people in this country?

Furthermore, let me ask you this. Are those of us who really benefit from democracy fighting to preserve its principles? Most of us talk a good deal about the "menace" of Fascism and Communism, but are we giving any reality to the special advantages that democracy offers over those other forms of government? Because we live in a democracy we have a right to free speech, a free press, the right of free assembly. Nobody in Germany or Italy or Russia has any of those rights. Well, are we according those rights to every citizen in our democracy? They

are not doing it in Jersey City, where certain American citizens are not granted the right to make speeches in public. We aren't even doing it right here in Louisville, where a handful of Communists wanted to have a meeting on the Court House steps to talk about Germany's treatment of Czechoslovakia. The city authorities would not permit those people to hold a meeting because they said they feared it might cause a riot for some American citizens to get up and say something that another group of American citizens might not like.

I haven't the slightest use for the Communist Party, but it is our boast that we live in a democracy, and a democracy promises everybody the right of free speech. A Fascist or a Communist government suppresses free speech. Do we want to take a leaf out of their book and start suppressing free speech on the part of any group of citizens, no matter how much we disapprove of what they say?

I am not one of the people who is always seeing spies under the bed. I don't think all the spies that ever came out of Germany could have the slightest effect on the American form of government unless the American people themselves get tired of their own democratic ideals and principles. That is where Fascism meets us face to face. Don't forget that the German people had a democracy for a few years after the World War, and during that time they had a free press and free speech and most of the other fine advantages of democracy. Why did they give it all up and turn to Fascism, which robbed them of those very advantages? They

did it because there were too many people in Germany who had no way of making a living, and who therefore had no real freedom. They did it because the whole nation got discouraged under a democracy. They began to think it would be better to have a strong dictatorship which could regiment the resources of the country, put everybody to work, and build up a powerful nation that could demand its place in world affairs. Those objectives seemed a lot more important to millions of Germans in all classes, upper and lower, than the advantages of democracy.

We needn't deceive ourselves by saying over and over that Hitler is a bad man who is misleading the German people. We needn't repeat, as many Americans do, that Fascism is a wicked form of government and democracy a good form of government, and therefore democracy must eventually prevail. Let's not fool ourselves about a thing as vital as this. We hate the very thought of Fascism, but that shouldn't blind us to the fact that Fascism offers some perfectly solid and immediate advantages to a desperate nation. Anybody who has ever paid any attention to politics knows that a dictator can accomplish as much in a year as the president of a democracy could accomplish in a generation. Those accomplishments may destroy the nation in the long run, but they are definite and quick and emphatic, which is what a discouraged people want. Hitler brought Germany out of chaos and desperation and made it the nation that all the world fears today. We hate Hitler's principles and we hate his method of

doing this job, but we needn't fool ourselves that the great majority of Germans don't like it. The prestige and power that Germany has gained under Hitler are simply worth more to most Germans than the right to criticize their government in public or to vote for the man they want in elections. The German people were willing to sell their birthright for a mess of pottage, but they are growing fat and arrogant off of that pottage. It is not inconceivable that a majority of American people might want economic security so desperately that they would be willing to gamble their democratic privileges away on the chance of getting it through some new form of government.

Where else in the world does democracy hold a chance against the quick, shot-in-the-arm advantages of Fascism? Czechoslovakia tried to have a democracy, and they tried harder than we in America have ever tried. Do you know that in Czechoslovakia every man and woman over 21 not only can vote, but he must vote, or suffer a fine, and if he persists in failing to vote, he is liable to a prison sentence? Here in America it is considered remarkable if 70 per cent of the eligible voters cast a ballot in an election, and in most Southern states anywhere from a third to a half of the population are just blithely disfranchised by a little device called the polltax. Everybody votes in Czechoslovakia, but the people who are left in that little torn-up country are pretty sure to feel now that they need other things more than they need the right to vote and the other democratic privileges. They will probably turn to a Fascist government

to give them more unified military power in a world that has decided to rely on force.

France and England are trying to uphold democracy, but they are not making their democracies work properly. In addition, Fascist bombs may drop any day on the roofs of Paris and London, and it is a fact of history that war does not foster democracy. Given another conflict in Europe, France and Britain are both likely to muster their resources under a totalitarian government, and democracy will go up in the smoke of the first shells. The Scandinavian countries are doing some good work with democracy, but they are too small to have any great influence on the world.

That leaves the future of democracy pretty much up to the United States. We have been proud to claim it as our own, and now we have got to be proud enough of it to go out and fight for it. I don't mean we have got to fight a foreign war to impose democracy on other nations. It simply can't be done that way. We have heard a lot of fine, peace-loving Americans in recent weeks talking about the necessity of fighting Hitler and Mussolini in order to "save democracy." Democracy can't be saved that way, in the blood of a battlefield. Suppose we joined in a fight to whip Hitler and Mussolini and succeeded in driving those two men out of power. Would Germany and Italy accept democracy as a substitute? Certainly not. They would go to work the day after the war was over and set up another Totalitarian state, either Fascist or Communist, to try to recoup their losses. We can't save the world for democracy by going out and

killing people who don't believe in democracy. We let millions of people die for that purpose between 1914 and 1918, and the world is less safe for democracy now than it has ever been.

American people who listened to the speech that Hitler delivered over the radio at the height of the recent crisis were genuinely shocked at his repeated references to "lying democracies". He reviled the very name of democracy, and his audience cheered him wildly. We have got to remember that 80,000,000 Germans and many millions of other people all over the world think democracy has failed. That leaves it up to us to prove that they are wrong. This is no time to be smug here in America and to pat ourselves on the back about our perfect form of government. The men who founded a democracy in this country had no such notion of its perfection. They thought of democracy as a pliable system that offers scope to the finest efforts that man can make in self-government. It is a noble instrument that demands to be handled nobly. If we handle it carelessly and over-confidently, it is capable of producing chaos in our country. Democracy offers us much, but it requires much of us as citizens. It is always easier to call a dictator and tell him to run the whole show for us, but we want a democracy because it gives us a chance to take our own part in government. Democracy is essentially a bargain between government and the citizen. The democratic government offers all the advantages of freedom, but it requires in return a responsibility on the part of the citizen to find good people to represent him in public office and to see that the ad-

vantages of liberty are secured to all his fellow-countrymen. People living in dictator countries have no such responsibilities. Too many Americans today are failing to live up to their side of the democratic bargain.

If we ever lose our democracy, why will we do it? I think we might lose it for the simple reason that you and I have not tried hard enough to make it work. You and I are the ones who have reaped the benefits of democracy, but we have not seen that those benefits have extended to enough Americans. We have enjoyed our freedom and our rights, but we have forgotten to provide millions of other Americans with the right to make a decent living and to call their souls their own. We have left a good third of our people without the essential benefits of democracy, and have told them that they ought to be satisfied because they live in a democratic country.

America today is the white hope of democracy in the world, and we can only hope to preserve it by providing such a good example that the nations must see its advantages. The American people have never tried with all their great powers to make a democracy work on these shores. Now is the time to try it. If we can make our country a real land of the free for all our people, we may save half the world from bondage.

But let's stop waving flags and saying that our democracy is perfect. Let's admit that democracy is a dangerous and beautiful gift that

was given us, like the Biblical talents, to be used for the benefit of every man and woman in the United States. Let's prove to the world that democracy is not a boon to half the people in America and a delusion to the other half. Let's show the world while there is still time that for the first time in the history of mankind we have made the democratic ideal really work!

That is our hope for the future, and the hope of the world. The men who founded this country were not afraid to make sacrifices for democracy. We must not be afraid. Only in that way, in the words of the Constitution, can we "assure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity."